DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 603 SP 036 104

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TITLE Conversation in Teaching; Conversation as Research: A Self-Study of the Teaching of Collaborative Action Research.
PUB DATE Apr 95
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 18-22, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Action Research; *Cooperative Learning; *Discussion Groups; Educational Research; Educational Researchers; *Education Courses; Group Discussion; Higher Education; Peer Relationship; *Reflective Teaching; Self Evaluation (Groups); Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Education; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

A self-study is reported in which the researcher explored the possibility of using a university course on action research to promote the development of professional community, an examination of power relations, and a sense of recognition among teachers enrolled in the course of their own expertise. Approximately 20 participating teachers in each of 2 courses collaborated in small group, large group, written, and one-on-one conversations to examine and research their own pedagogical methods and practices. The model of action research chosen was that of enhanced normal practice, in which teachers collaborate through the mechanisms of anecdote-telling, experimentation with new ideas, and systematic inquiry. A variety of methods were used to promote conversation among students, including electronic mail, research notebook response groups, data workshops, and oral final presentations. Participants found these conversations useful for the selection and clarification of starting points for research, and for deciding on appropriate methods for data collection and analysis. Students also stated that the techniques used to promote conversation fostered greater equity in the class, cultivated a sense of community built upon diversity, and provided insight into problematic aspects of teachers' practices. Implications for the role of the professor as both researcher and instructor are discussed. (Contains 26 references.) (PB)

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ED 384 603

Conversation in teaching; Conversation as research
A self-study of the teaching of collaborative action research

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Introduction

In this paper I focus on the techniques that I developed to help to resolve a dilemma inherent in my role as a university instructor of action research. The origin of the dilemma was the dissonance between my role in the university and my conception of action research as a process engaged in by practitioners in their educational situations, independent of the university. I begin the paper with a brief autobiographical segment as part of a framework that includes my model of action research as enhanced normal practice (Feldman, 1994b), and the role of collaborative, sustained conversation as a form of research (Feldman, 1994d; Hollingsworth, 1994). In the section that follows, I describe the actions that I took as the instructor of the course to shape the role that conversation played and report on the results of this "intervention." At that point I briefly describe my research methods. I then return to the dilemma to seek to understand whether success in the university class qua class is "good enough." I end the paper by looking at this self-study to see how it relates to my conception of action research.

Origins of the dilemma

As I began the self-study that I report on here, I was a very new (first-year) assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst. I had just spent four years as a doctoral student after being a classroom teacher for the previous seventeen. It was in my first year as a graduate student, through conversations with my advisor, J. Myron (Mike) Atkin, that I learned about action research, and began to use it as a label for what I had been doing as a teacher for much of that career.

A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 18-22, 1995, San Francisco, CA.

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In the following years I learned more about action research by reading, talking, writing, and through working with teachers engaged in action research in several contexts. While the particulars of each situation varied significantly from one another, they shared two important characteristics: First, my relationships with these teachers were independent of any formal arrangement with the schools in which they taught. Administrators and teachers in their schools were aware of their action research activities, but all arrangements were made between the teachers and myself. The second was that they were engaged in action research independent of any course of study in the university: their action research was done as professionals in practice, not as students enrolled in college courses for credit.

My work with these different teachers in their contexts has led me to write a number of papers on various aspects of action research (Feldman, 1994a; 1994b; 1994c; 1994d; 1995), and most important for the purposes of this paper, led me to consider and construct a model of action research that could be self-sustainable in the practice of teachers (Feldman and Atkin, 1995). This notion of self-sustainability is an important part of my conception of action research, and how it relates to professional practice and the improvement of schooling. Mike Atkin and I have explored the issues that surround self-sustainability elsewhere (1995), and I will return to it later in this paper because my commitment to a form of action research that is self-sustainable in the practice of teachers is at the core of the dilemma that was the starting point (Altrichter, Posch, Somekh, 1993) of this self-study.

My dilemma arose at the start of my second semester as a college professor when I began to teach a course in action research. At that time it was clear to me that there was a dissonance between my public advocacy of action research as an activity that teachers engage in independent of universities, and my teaching it as a one-semester, graduate level course to fulfill certification requirements. The dilemma resides in the fundamental differences between being a college student and being a

practicing teacher. These differences, which are technical, political, and normative (Oakes, Quartz, Gong, Guiton, and Lipton, 1993) in nature include the ways that the work day is structured, the separate and interconnecting hierarchies of school and university, and the ways that teachers' expertise is valued. The issues that arise include the difficulty of building professional community among the students who are a transient population, and of urging, if not requiring, student teachers to research and promote change in situations in which they are visitors and guests. Given all this, my dilemma can be put as,

> How can I use a university course on action research to promote the development of professional community, the illumination of power relations, and a recognition of one's own expertise?

Action research as enhanced normal practice

In the context of the action research course, and in my public advocacy of action research, I define it as a self-reflexive process that is systematic, critical inquiry made public (Stenhouse, 1975). The goal of action research is the improvement of practice and an improved understanding of the educational situation in which the practice is immersed. In the way that I define it, action research can be seen as a methodology, an orientation towards doing research, rather than a particular set of quantitative or qualitative methods. With this broad definition of action research, methods follow from the orientation of the question, dilemma, or dissonance that guides the research. The limitations that are imposed are from the outside, such as from positivistic research orientations that require methods designed to minimize bias that can interfere with or prevent the reflexive nature of action research.

Because my definition of action research allows for a variety of ways of enactment, it is important for me to make explicit the models that I discussed and encouraged in my university course. At this time in the USA there are at least three schools of action, or teacher, research. The first derives from the work of Steven

Corey (1953), which I did not include in the course because of its traditionally close connection to university schools of education. The second has been introduced to the United States from the UK where it developed under the leadership of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) and John Elliott (1991), among others. The third is an outgrowth of the work of the various Writing Projects (BAWP, 1979) and other centers such as the Prospect School (Carini, 1978) around the USA and their encouragement of teachers of writing to look critically at their own practice to improve it and to share what they have learned with other practitioners. The students enrolled in my university course were most influenced by the latter two schools of teacher research through my perspective and the readings selected for the course (e.g. Altrichter, et. al., 1993; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993).

While the students in the course were exposed to writings from these two schools, they were also influenced by my model for the enactment of action research, enhanced normal practice (Feldman, 1994b). In enhanced normal practice, teachers engage collaboratively in action research through three mechanisms: anecdote-telling, the trying out of ideas, and systematic inquiry. Before I describe the mechanisms, it is important for me to define what I mean by collaborative. I am referring to a group of teachers -- or other practitioners -- who form a group within which they work together to engage in action research on their individual practices. When the teachers gather together, they share stories of practice. One teacher may tell an anecdote, the others listen. The listeners respond with their own anecdotes, with questions that ask for details, or with questions that take a critical turn and explore the nature of teaching and learning in schools in the context of the anecdote told. This is not a transmission model; rather it is a dialectical conversational exchange in a particular situation that relies on the teachers' expertise and experiences -- what Searle calls the Background, "the set of skills, habits, abilities,

etc., against which intentional states function (1984, 68)." I return to this later in the paper when I examine the role of conversation as a form of research.

As might be expected, ideas about practice are shared and develop in the anecdote-telling process. The teachers go back to their classrooms and try out these ideas. They then return to the group with new anecdotes that describe how these ideas were enacted and how the students responded to them. Again, the other teachers in the collaborative group respond to the anecdotes with their stories and with new questions. In this way, through both the taking of actions and through conversation, there is an improvement of practice and better understanding of the teachers' educational situations.

The third mechanism of enhanced normal practice, systematic inquiry, is what many mean by "action research." It relies heavily on the collection and analysis of data in the modes of operation of the university. In the model of enhanced normal practice, systematic inquiry begins as the result of the uncovering of dilemmas or dissonances in practice that can only be resolved through a detailed, systematic look at the practice situation.

The model of action research as enhanced normal practice is based on a theoretical perspective that depends on two distinctions -- the first between knowledge and understanding and the second between context and situation (Feldman, 1993) -- and on the ways that knowledge and understanding grow through conversation (Feldman, 1994d). While research often leads to propositional knowledge, a product of human activity that is codifiable and can act as a commodity, the model of action research of enhanced normal practice also recognizes the construction of understanding through meaning making, both individually and in collaborative groups, as legitimate outcomes of participation in the research process. This recognition is dependent on the postulate that human action is best understood by thinking about people as beings immersed in situations,

rather than as actors in context (Heidegger, 1962). By conceptualizing being, acting, knowing, and understanding in this way, conversation becomes a viable method for doing research (Feldman, 1994d), and action research can be seen to be constituent of conversation among people, and between people and situations (Feldman, 1994a).

Long and serious conversations as research

Action research as enhanced normal practice is dependent on the creation of what Hollingsworth has called sustained conversations (1994) and what I have called long and serious conversations (Feldman, 1994d). Conversation serves as research because it promotes the exchange of knowledge and the generation of understanding through dialectical meaning-making processes. I must make clear that I am not making use of a conduit model in which words are the intermediaries between people that result in the transfer of thoughts, knowledge, or feelings (Reddy, 1979). I also must make clear that in my reference to the exchange of knowledge I am referring to the commodity form of knowledge that is a product of human enterprises. Even though this form of knowledge can exist in some ways separate from human beings, people must appropriate it for it to be useful. The words spoken in conversation do not have meanings independent of the participants in the conversation -- those words must be appropriated by the speaker and then reappropriated by the others through listening, reflecting, questioning, and responding (Wertsch, 1991).

Conversations can play an important part in research because they promote the sharing of knowledge and the development of understanding, and are critical inquiry processes. They are inquiry processes when the participants enter into conversations for the purposes of sharing and developing knowledge and understanding, and when people enter into them to make defensible decisions about goals or actions. In this latter case, the participants are engaging in a form of practical reasoning, such as Aristotelian phronēsis (Irwin, 1985). Conversations are

critical inquiry processes because they are hermeneutic (Gadamer, 1992). In conversations, the participants move between the conversational situation, their immediate understanding, and a more global understanding of what is being said, listened to, reflected upon, and responded to. In this way conversations are analogous to the hermeneutic circle and textual interpretations -- conversation leads to new understanding and the new understanding shapes the conversation. And staying with the analogy, just as a hermeneutic reading of a text is critical, so is conversation as a way to come to understand. It follows then, returning to Stenhouse's definition of research, that conversations, which can be mechanisms for critical inquiry, become a research method by being systematized through the anecdote-telling mechanism of collaborative action research. From this it can be seen that my model of sustainable action research, enhanced normal practice, relies heavily on the use of conversations as research. In the next section of this paper, I describe some of the ways in which I promoted their use.

Promoting conversation in the action research class

At this time, I have taught the action research class twice (Year 1 and Year 2). Each time there have been approximately 20 students, with a good mix of men and women. Most of the students are practicing teachers who are enrolled in masters or doctoral degree programs on a part-time basis. The others include principals, guidance counselors, and specialists in reading, computers, special education, and students from the programs in international education, family therapy, and counseling psychology. The course is also expected to be a way for students to fulfill the research requirement of the new Massachusetts Standard certification for secondary teachers.

Because of the large number of part-time graduate students in the School of Education, most courses are offered on a once-per-week basis for 14 weeks, late in the afternoon after school is let out. The action research course has met both years in

the 7-9:30 PM time slot. Many of the students are on campus once per week -- they may be enrolled in a class that meets from 4-6:30 PM and then in a second at the later time slot. These students have had a very long day: They are up early to begin teaching school by 8:00 AM. Almost immediately after school, they drive upwards of 2 hours to arrive at the University by 4:00 PM for their first class. With little break, just enough time to eat a sandwich or grab a snack from a machine, they are in my classroom at 7:00 PM to begin to investigate their own practice.

I began the course by assuming that much of the research would take place outside of class time, and that the course would be structured as a graduate seminar, with weekly readings and a mix of activities to promote discussion about the readings. I had asked a colleague (Susan Noffke) for a copy of the syllabus for her action research course, and saw that it contained the requirement that students prepare a short speech early in the semester about a research topic. I decided to incorporate these starting point speeches into the course. In addition, I felt that it was important for students to keep a journal, what I call a research notebook, and for them to share their notes, observations, reflections, and so on with one another. I adapted a technique that I had seen another colleague (Gary Lichtenstein) use. I asked my students to form small groups that would meet outside regular class time. In these research notebook response groups they would share their research notebooks, read each others entries, and respond to them in writing in the notebooks. I decided to use this technique as a way to model or mimic the collaborative action research groups that play a central role in enhanced normal practice. I had also set aside some time at the end of the semester for students to present their research to one another.

Overall, I used seven techniques to promote conversation among students as part of the action research course. They were

- The use of electronic communications (email),

- Small group discussions,
- Whole class discussions,
- Research notebook response groups,
- Data workshops (small group discussions of their data),
- Starting point speeches, and
- Oral final presentations.

In addition, I encouraged conversation between the students and myself through email, and by written comments on starting point speeches, interim reports, and final reports.

Methods of the self-study

Did the students find these conversations useful? If so, for what reasons? Did they engage in conversations that helped them to do action research to improve their practice and to come to better understandings of their educational situations? And, returning to the dilemma that acted as a starting point for this self-study, did these techniques for encouraging conversation promote the development of professional community, the illumination of power relations, and the students' recognition of their own expertise?

The methods that I used to answer these questions were quite straightforward. I kept a research notebook in which I wrote notes of class occurrences, plans for the class meetings, reflections on classes, and hypotheses about why things were happening as they were. I collected the students' work: their written starting point speeches, their interim reports, and their final reports. I also kept copies of my responses to their written work. During Year 2 I audiotaped the starting point speeches, the research notebook response group presentations and students' final oral reports. In both years I collected course evaluations from the students, and in Year 2 I received written comments (response cards) about the class from the students immediately following 7 of the sessions. I have saved all email

communication between the students and myself. In addition, during Year 2, one student, Marsha Alibrandi, who is also my research assistant, kept her own notes about the structure of the class and aided in this analysis (see Table 1: Data sources). In particular she was interested in whether or how the class moved towards a democratic ideal.

These data sources were coded using the methods described by Miles and Huberman (1984). I looked for comments that students made about the types of verbal exchanges that occurred in the class (see Table 2: Types of verbal exchanges among students and Table 3: Types of verbal exchanges with instructor) and noted whether they were positive or negative comments, and what importance the students gave go the activities (see Table 4: List of codes). I developed the coding categories by reading through the data following the methods of the development of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Data and analysis

It is evident from the data that the students found the techniques for promoting conversation useful as they engaged in action research. The vast majority of comments about the techniques were positive. This may be due to students' reluctance to publicly criticize a course. There are indications that this was not the case. I will return to this latter.

The reasons that students gave for finding conversations useful (Table 4) can be grouped into three larger areas: research methods, group processes, and outcomes of action research. In the first area, students found the conversations useful for the selection and clarification of starting points for research, and for deciding on appropriate data collection and analysis methods. Students also stated that the techniques for promoting conversation encouraged greater equity in the class, provided opportunities for the sharing of ideas, and for general support of one another in the class and in their practice. The result was a growth of community

that was built upon diversity in the group in some cases, and shared experiences in others. Finally, the students stated that the techniques helped them to recognize what was problematic in their practice, and that they were helped to understand their practice better and to decide what actions to take to improve their practice.

It is clear from the data that the students found the research notebook response groups an important forum for the discussion of issues in each of these areas. However, while there was a preponderance of data that referred to the response groups, this should not be taken as an absolute measure of worth in comparison with the other techniques for the promotion of conversation. Much of the data about the response groups had as its source the presentations made by each group about how they structured and used that their time together. While discussions of the use of other techniques did occur in the class, none were focused on in the same way as the response groups.

Data workshops also appeared in each of the three areas, but with a greater occurrence in outcomes. This is not surprising since data workshops came in the latter part of the course.

Most of the data on the use of email came from the exchanges that I had with the students. I did not have access to the exchanges between students. During much of the course the email exchange between students and me focused on research methods. Students sought clarification and feedback on their choice of starting points and on the research methods that they were choosing to use. In the last few weeks of the course the exchanges focused on ending -- when final reports would be handed in, questions about grades, and questions about what was to come next, e.g., independent studies and dissertations using action research and possibilities of presented their research at conferences.

As I have already stated, there were very few negative comments about the use of these techniques. While this could be due to the reluctance of students to

make public critiques of instructors or their courses, the students did have opportunities to make their comments anonymously. At the end of nearly half the class sessions in Year 2 I solicited anonymous feedback on the particular class sessions, and at the end of each semester I collected anonymous course evaluation forms. Two negative themes emerged. The first was that there was too much emphasis in the course on theoretical aspects of teacher research. This is not surprising from a student body that is composed entirely of practitioners. The second theme was how the whole class discussions acted against democratic processes in the class by allowing for inequity in participation.[1]

The research notebook response groups became sites for the development of what may be called community. Lave and Wegner (1991) have defined a community of practice as

> a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. [It] is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage (p. 98).

For many of the students in the course the research notebook response groups became communities of practice in which learning took place. The support from others and the development of equitable relationships that were devoid of hierarchy aided in the growth of community that resulted in sharing of ideas about research, outcomes of the research, and about group processes.[2]

As it turned out, the nature of the students' private and work lives made it difficult for some to set up and maintain these groups. Their once per week schedules at the University left little time for them to meet as small groups outside of class sessions. However, this was accomplished in a variety of creative ways, such as by meeting before or after the class, using email and conference calls, and in Year

1, three students car-pooled and therefore spent two hours a week together outside of class. There were also groups in which the dynamics between members impeded the development of community. For example, there was a group that lost two of its members early on. The result was a highly inequitable relationship between the two remaining participants -- a very experienced practitioner (more than 25 years of practice) and an undergraduate from a neighboring college.

From the above, it appears that this intervention into my own practice as an instructor of a university course in action research was successful. Several of the techniques that I used to promote conversation appeared to be successful, especially the use of the research notebook response groups and the data workshops. The students found them useful for shaping research questions and designs, for the promotion of communities of practice, and for encouraging the outcomes of engagement in action research -- the recognition of what is problematic in practice, new understandings of practice, and help in deciding what actions to take as to improve practice.

At this point it is necessary for me to look back at the dilemma that shaped this inquiry. In it I asked how I could use a university course on action research to promote the development of professional community, the illumination of power relations, and a recognition of one's own expertise. For the most part, it appears that while the introduction of techniques to promote conversation were successful in relation to the situation of the action research course, this success did not extend far into most of the students' practices. There was, however, one exception: I appear to have met my goals implicit in the statement of the dilemma with a group of doctoral students who serve as supervisors and instructors in the teacher education programs (TEPs) in the University.

These doctoral students have formed a professional community that has gone beyond the bounds of their course in Year 1, and in their action research papers they

noted the power relations that structure their roles in the TEPs, and they recognized their own expertise (Gabriel, Feldman, Alibrandi, Capifali, Floyd, Hitchens, Mera, Henriques, and Lucey, 1995).

Why did this happen with the doctoral students involved in TEPs but not with the other students -- doctoral or otherwise -- in the course? This may best be seen by thinking of the students as having two different but interrelated practices. Most of the students practice as teachers and administrators in schools, while in the University, they practice as students. It appears that the conversational techniques were most useful for improving that practice -- their work as students within the situation of the action research course. A revisit to my data confirm this -- most of the comments about the use of the conversational techniques referred to how they helped the students to do their action research projects. Although it is true that these projects were focused on their school practice, it was in the context of my course, and the students were at least as concerned with the completion of the projects for grades and credit as they were for the improvement of their practice as teachers and administrators.

While all of the above is true for the doctoral students involved in the TEPs, each of their two practices were located in the University. This may not be the sole cause for the outcomes that they experienced, but it may be significant that their inquiry did not suffer from the gap that the other students felt between their practices and the world of the university.

One way to test this is to look at another action research project located within the University -- my self-study of my role as instructor of the action research course. Interestingly enough, my experience seems closer to that of the school teachers and administrators than to that of the doctoral students involved with the TEPs. What I think has happened in this paper is that I have allowed one of the practices that I engage in to overwhelm the other. These two practices are as an educational

researcher and as a university instructor. Each of these practices is situated. As an instructor, my practice has been a part of the situation constituted by the two courses in action research that I have taught. In the case of the self-study reported on here, my practice as an educational researcher has been part of the situation shaped by my inquiry into the educational situation that includes my practice as an instructor. And so this paper, and the self-study that it describes, is more closely connected to my practice as an educational researcher than as an instructor.

Findings

What have I learned from this self-study of my teacher education practices? First, I have found that there have been positive effects of the techniques that I used to encourage conversation in my action research course. For the most part, the students found these techniques to be an important part of their selection and clarification of starting points for research; deciding on their data collection and analysis methods; recognizing what is problematic in their practice; coming to understand that practice better; and in deciding on what actions to take to improve their practice. In a way, what I have done in this self-study is to satisfy my need to know (Feldman, 1994a) that the teacher education practices that I engaged in in this course had the effects that I desired.

I have also found that for the students, the formation of, and the participation in, caring groups of peers was one of the most important outcomes of the course. Students who had felt isolated in the teacher education program now felt surrounded by new colleagues and friends. This appears to be just the type of collegial group that teachers are being encouraged to form to effect educational reform. However, these communities were short-lived due to the transitory nature of the student population. Only one group continued to meet -- one comprised of the doctoral students who were involved in the TEPs. And it was these students whose experiences in the course most closely matched my vision of action research

as enhanced normal practice, and were able to identify hierarchies and acknowledge their own expertise.

Finally, as I wrote this paper for a session focusing on the self-study of teacher education practices at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, I found myself referring to a post hoc set of methods that I used to analyze data that I collected during the two semesters that I taught the course in action research. In rereading what I wrote, I realized that what I had described bore little resemblance to the ways that I had shaped the course as I taught it or the reasons why I changed my practices during those two semesters. I discovered that by writing this paper in the role of an educational researcher, I had made my practice as an instructor invisible. While I did describe to some extent what happened in class, the post hoc study left out that part of my practice in which I decided on the actions that I took as instructor. Returning to my model of action research as enhanced normal practice, what I have presented here is the result of a systematic inquiry that I did of my practice. Missing are descriptions and analyses of how anecdote-telling and the trying out of ideas shaped what I do as course instructor.

Conclusion: Dilemmas arise

I began the paper with a dilemma -- how to teach action research in a university setting when I envision it as a process embedded in practice. What I have found in trying to resolve this dilemma is that a parallel one exists in my own practice. As an educational researcher in the university, I look at research from a particular vantage point. When I tried to apply those methods to the study of my own practice as an instructor, I found them unsatisfying. In doing so, I ignored the other aspects of enhanced normal practice that helped me to decide how to shape the course.

I have begun to think of those aspects, the anecdote-telling and the trying out of ideas, as the occurrent study to distinguish it from the one that was done post hoc

and reported on here. It is the occurrent study that was immersed in my practice as a university instructor and which could be found in a narrative of my intentions, actions, and reflections on those actions. It also existed in conversations that I had with colleagues, friends, and students about the goings on in the class and how they related to my intentions. And so it appears that just as my students' action research remained distinct from their practice as teachers because of its location in the situation of the university course in action research, my self-study of my teacher education practices has remained distinct from my practice as a teacher educator because of its location in the situation that includes AERA.

Perhaps what remains to be done is for me to not only continue to find ways that bridge the gaps between the university and schools for teachers, but also to find ways to bridge the gaps that exist between my roles as educational researcher and instructor.

Notes:

[1] This was also made clear in an analysis done by Marsha Alibrandi of turn taking in one of the whole class sessions.

[2] These were themes addressed in a study of the action research done on graduate students' roles in teacher education programs that emerged from the course in year 1 (Gabriel et. al., 1995).

Table 1: Data sources

AF notebooks (AF1, AF2)
MA notebooks, response group tapes (RGT)
final report tapes (FRT)
course evaluations (CE)
response cards (RC)
email (EM)
Final reports (FR)

Table 2: Types of verbal exchanges among students

Analytic discourse
Data workshops
Email
Final reports
Interim reports
Jig saw
Response groups
Starting point speeches
Whole class discussions
General comments
General group comments

Table 3: Types of verbal exchanges with instructor

Email
Final comments
Interim reports
Starting point speeches
General feedback
General written feedback

Table 4: List of codes why conversations were important:

Selection and clarification of starting points (SSP)
Deciding on data collection and analysis (DCA)
Recognizing what is problematic in their own practice (RPP)
Coming to understand their own practice better (UPB)
Deciding on what actions to take to improve their practice (DIP)
Equity (EQ)
Sharing of Ideas (SI)
General support (GS)
Diversity in Group (DIG)
Different from Colleagues in School (DCS)
Growth of Community (GC)
No diversity in group (NDG) [colleagues in same school]

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